Helicopter Support to Infantry

Dusting Off the Lessons of the Past

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Earlier this year, I read two articles in Army branch bulletins that highlighted the tactics and techniques used by aviation units in support of ground commanders and identified potential problem areas. *(See "Using Attack Helicopters," INFANTRY, March-April 1995; and "Air Ground Coordination in the hasty Attack," AVIATION DIGEST, March-April 1995.)* Although both articles were well written, they caused me to suspect that lessons learned from countless integrated training efforts— and from several battlefields— may have been forgotten in some units.

Beginning in 1962 with the Howze Board, aerial gunnery support to infantry units was one of the primary missions conducted and tested on a daily basis. Those techniques were further developed and refined during the extensive two-year testing of the 11th Air Assault Division. Thus, by the time the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) deployed to Vietnam in 1965, aerial gunnery support to the infantry battalions was fairly well locked in. As time went by, the standing operating procedures (SOPS) were refined, coordination procedures were improved, and command and control methods were developed. This support by armed helicopters (now attack helicopters) was vital to infantry units in Vietnam, and not only in the 1st Cavalry Division but in every division and separate brigade in country.

The result was a marriage between aviation and infantry that has been successful from 1962 to the present, and we cannot afford to let it deteriorate. Most infantrymen who fought during the long war in Southeast Asia had no difficulties with the relationship. While the AVIATION DIGEST article implies that air-ground coordination in the hasty attack is a recent development, these earlier efforts included employing attack helicopters during rapidly planned and executed attacks—which most *were* in Vietnam. As a matter of record, most engagements were either hasty attacks or hasty defensive fights, and helicopter support was essential to the survival of the supported infantry.

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SOPs were sound and well-tested; liaison officers were exchanged as necessary; brigade aviation officers in the S-3 shops were totally familiar with all aspects of upcoming operations; and aviation and infantry unit commanders worked closely together with respect to the impending operation and the aerial gunnery support that would be required. Moreover, when infantry units left base camps, they were moved by UH-1 "Huey" lift helicopters (now by UH-60 Black Hawks), enroute escort was provided by UH-1 gunships (later by AH-1 cobras), and long-range artillery was provided by Hueys or Cobras in the formal aerial rocket artillery (ARA) units.

In the early 1970s, more advanced threats caused a change in the tactical attack helicopter support to infantry units. During the 1972 Easter Offensive, the introduction of radar-guided ZSU-23s, 37mm systems, and the SA-2 missile pretty well cleared the skies of command and control ships, ARA, and any other rotary aircraft that could previously travel more than 1,500 feet above ground level with some degree of safety. Subsequently, the planning focused on using new tactics such as terrain flight and nap-of-the-earth movement.

But coordination between aviation and infantry units for attack helicopter support did not stop just because the threat changed. If you consider the question, "Will the battlefield of tomorrow be any different in regard to the relationship between infantry and aviation," the answer will be an unqualified "No." Whether the infantry is Ranger, light, mechanized, or airborne, aviation units will continue to provide troop lift and attack helicopter support, along with a multitude of other support missions, just as they have since 1962. On tomorrow's battlefield, this marriage will have to be more sound than ever before, and—because of the increasingly lethal weapons in the hands of the threat we may face on that battlefield—teamwork will be absolutely critical.

The key, of course, is training together at every opportunity. With the emphasis on killing enemy armor and

deep attacks by AH-64s, it is easy to overlook supporting infantry units. There should be no doubt, however, that infantry units will continue to play a decisive role in any future war. If a conflict occurs in Eastern Europe, the role of infantry units will be critical. In those areas where restrictive terrain prevails, what other units besides infantry battalions and brigades will play the decisive role?

Even along the old general defense positions in the former West Germany, mechanized and motorized infantry would have occupied the bulk of the positions. Sixty percent of the territory where NATO formerly would have engaged Warsaw Pact forces was good infantry country.

Any conflict in Korea or Southeast Asia will heavily involve infantry units, and organic aviation units will provide attack helicopter support wherever the fight occurs. In fact, one of the disturbing facts about both of the articles mentioned earlier is that combat aviation battalions joined divisions in the 1970s, and the problems addressed in the articles were long ago resolved.

In the U.S. Army, Europe (USAREUR), which—like South Korea—was probably closer to the threat, aviation units were rapidly assimilated into their divisions, where they played a major role in providing fire support. No brigade ever went to Grafenwoehr or Hohenfels without an aviation unit in direct support, including an attack helicopter element. Tactics, techniques, and procedures—whereby instant fire support was provided—were perfected. Through continual liaision and training together, this close coordination saw aviation units become an integral member of the combined arms team, and although the divisions in USAREUR got a jump on those in the continental United States, it didn't take long for all divisions to fully understand just what the new aviation battalions brought to the fight.

Now we have aviation brigades assigned, and it is troubling to read about how coordination is being accomplished in one unit, as if it were a great revelation, coupled with the assertion that attack helicopters cannot support hasty attacks in another unit. On the basis of this rich history of coordinated aviation-infantry teamwork, it is inconceivable that an attack helicopter unit would be unable to contact its supported ground unit during *any* attack, much less a hasty one.

Where were the SOPs in these units? Where were the liaision officers? What procedures had been worked out previously to cover such a contingency? Why couldn't the OH-58s properly identify the targets before clearing the attack helicpters to fire? How is it possible for an aviation unit in direct support to be unaware of the ground commander's intent or planned scheme of maneuver?

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Somewhere during the planning, the supporting aviation unit should have been brought on board. The fact that the AH-64 has one FM radio and cannot talk to the infantry commander is inexcusable at a time where we worry about fratricide. That is why the team leader is in an Oh-58 with two FM radios: to ensure that he has whatever details are needed to coordinate the mission. Marking friendly positions by the ground commander is a matter of SOP and after more than 30 years should not be a problem today.

It is absolutely imperative that the aviation-infantry bond be reinforced in response tot he uncertainties of today's world. Every time an infantry unit goes to the field, a supporting aviation element should be placed in direct support, including an attack slice. If the division deploys, surely the aviation brigade will be included. If this integrated training is overlooked, there may be a terrible price to pay when the chips are down and the bullets are real.

Infantry commanders need to realize that the attack helicopter is their greatest source of firepower. The ground commander has at his immediate disposal a capability that can influence the outcome of the fight at the forward line of troops, in the rear areas, or during a deep attack mission. It is also his most responsive system. But if the lesson learned from the past are not dusted off, updated, and revitalized in the SOPs of both infantry and aviation, we will continue to read about how one unit used attack helicopters and another shop up a supported infantry unit because it didn't know where the friendly troops were.

The Infantry School at fort Benning and Aviation School at Fort Rucker are not far apart in miles. But they must reduce the distance between their branches out in the divisions and brigades to make sure that integrated training is on the right track. Likewise, they must ensure that doctrinal issues, tactics, techniques, and procedures are evolving to meet changing threats; and that infantry and aviation, along with other members of the combined arms team, are fully prepared to win on tomorrow's battlefield.

If they are not, then the experience that was gained back in 1962 has been squandered and at a possible waste of time and lives. I want to believe that they are accomplishing these tasks to ensure coordination and integrated tactics, and those time-tested and perfected lessons are still on the shelf and only need dusting off once in a while to ensure that the infantry-attack helicopter role on the battlefield is on solid ground.

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